

Food Preparation on Better Days

Making lower-capacity days easier

A better day can create a useful window, but it is not a demand to prepare everything. Food preparation should save future effort without using all of today's energy. The aim is a few accessible components, portions or ready steps - not a perfect week of matching containers.

Stop while some capacity remains. Tomorrow's food should not cost you the rest of today.

Preparation is broader than batch cooking

Preparation can mean	The future step it removes	A low-demand example
Making visible	Remembering what exists.	Move two safe foods to eye level; add a short freezer list.
Opening or portioning	Starting when hungry.	Divide tolerated snacks into reachable portions.
Washing or chopping	Equipment and clean-up later.	Prepare one ingredient, not a whole recipe.
Cooking one component	Heat, timing and supervision.	Cook a familiar base that can be served in different ways.
Freezing a portion	Cooking on a very low-capacity day.	Freeze one extra portion once safely cooled.
Setting up access	Choosing, finding or asking.	Save an order, put utensils together, write two options.

Choose by return, not ambition

Ask	Useful test
Will this be eaten?	Prepare foods that are already acceptable. Do not use future hunger to pressure experimentation.
Will it still feel safe?	Consider texture after chilling or freezing, smell on reheating, food touching and product consistency.
Does it remove a real barrier?	Prioritise the step that usually stops eating: deciding, opening, chopping, heating, washing or remembering.
Can I store it safely?	Check container space, labels, cooling, dates, freezer capacity and reheating instructions first.
What will it cost today?	Include shopping, standing, noise, smells, decisions and cleaning - not only cooking time.

The capacity budget

Level	Preparation limit	Possible task	Stop point
Low	One action, up to a few minutes.	Move, open, portion or set out.	Before it becomes a chain of tasks.
Moderate	One ingredient or one component.	Wash/chop one item; cook one familiar base.	Before optional extras or full clean-up.
More available	One useful cooking block plus recovery.	Make one meal and one extra portion.	While energy remains for cooling, storing and safety.

A five-step better-day routine

1. Check	2. Choose	3. Prepare	4. Store	5. Recover
What capacity is genuinely available after today's other demands?	Pick one future barrier and one safe food/component.	Use the quietest, shortest acceptable method.	Cool, cover, label/date and refrigerate or freeze safely.	Stop. Sit down, drink, reset sensory load and leave non-urgent cleaning.

Maggie's reflection

For many neurodivergent people, a "good day" becomes the day we try to catch up with everything. That can turn preparation into another boom-and-bust cycle. A better day can simply be the day you make one later meal easier.

Prepare for access, safety and sensory needs

The useful component matters more than the impressive meal

Prepare only what remains acceptable after storage. Some foods become softer, wetter, stronger-smelling or mixed together. A system that ignores this may create food that exists but cannot be eaten.

Component preparation

Component	Prepare now	Keep flexible later
Familiar base	Cook or portion the reliable part of the meal.	Store additions separately so the base stays predictable.
Protein or filling element	Prepare a personally safe option in suitable portions.	Use only if safe for allergies, medical needs and storage time.
Sauce or flavour	Decant or make separately when tolerated.	Add at serving so smell, wetness and intensity stay controllable.
Texture element	Keep crisp/dry components sealed and separate.	Combine only at the point of eating.
Emergency route	Place ready-to-eat safe food where it can be seen.	Protect it from being used for another purpose.

Sensory planning before you begin

Possible barrier	Preparation adjustment
Noise from chopping, blender or extractor	Choose pre-cut/frozen items, quieter tools, another room or another person's help.
Strong cooking smell	Cold preparation, covered microwave method, ventilation, closed containers or prepare when able to leave the area.
Food touching or becoming wet	Use divided or separate containers; store sauces and toppings apart.
Uncertain reheated texture	Test one small portion separately; record method and time only after it works.
Visual overload	Clear one work area, bring out only required items and put finished portions away promptly.
Touch aversion	Use utensils, gloves where safe, food-safe paper or pre-prepared ingredients.

Food-safety essentials

Stage	Safer practice
Before	Check allergens every time; wash hands and surfaces; separate raw and ready-to-eat foods; follow package instructions.
Cooking	Cook foods thoroughly using current UK guidance. A food thermometer may help when appropriate; follow manufacturer and FSA advice.
Cooling	Cool cooked food promptly and place it in the fridge or freezer within the time advised by current Food Standards Agency guidance.
Storage	Use clean covered containers, date them, keep the fridge at the recommended temperature and follow use-by dates.
Reheating	Reheat only as recommended, until steaming hot throughout where applicable, and follow limits on repeated reheating.
When unsure	Do not rely on smell or taste to judge safety. Check current official guidance or discard when safety cannot be established.

Shortcuts are accessibility tools

Barrier	Legitimate shortcut
Standing and chopping	Frozen chopped ingredients, prepared produce, seated work surface or help.
Too many pans	One-tray, microwave, slow-cooker or ready-cooked components when personally suitable.
Remembering dates	Large removable labels, a freezer list or a "use first" area.
Portion decisions	Use a familiar bowl/container as a visual guide; freeze single personally manageable portions.
Washing-up	Line trays where safe, soak promptly, reuse the serving container or choose no-cook preparation.

Do not prepare past the safe stopping point

Stop if coordination, concentration or tolerance is falling; heat or sharp tools no longer feel safe; pain, dizziness or fatigue rises; food cannot be cooled/stored promptly; or completing the task will remove capacity needed to eat. Turning off heat and storing food safely is the priority.

Myth and reality

Myth	Reality
"A better day should produce a week of meals."	One washed ingredient or extra portion can be enough.
"Freshly prepared is always better."	Frozen, tinned and ready-prepared foods can improve access and reduce waste.
"If I made it, I must eat it."	Capacity and sensory needs change. Store or discard safely without shame.

My better-day preparation map

Prepare a little; protect the energy needed to eat

Today's honest capacity	Low / Moderate / More available
Energy I need to keep for later	_____
The future barrier I want to remove	Choosing / opening / chopping / cooking / cleaning / remembering / other: _____
My safe food or component	_____

Choose one preparation task

Task	Future step removed	Time limit	Stop point	Storage plan
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Optional only: _____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Sensory and safety check

Check	My plan
Texture/temperature after storage	_____
Smell, sound, touch or food-separation adjustment	_____
Allergen/intolerance/medical instructions checked	_____
Cooling, container, date and fridge/freezer space	_____
Who can help with the blocked step	_____

My three levels of preparation

Low: one action	Moderate: one component	More available: one cooking block
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Afterwards

What helped?	What became too much?	What will I repeat or remove?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Safety, sources and support

Food Standards Agency: [food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene](https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene) - current UK guidance on cooking, chilling, freezing, reheating, date labels and allergens. **NHS:** [nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/) - general nutrition and food guidance. **Beat:** [beateatingdisorders.org.uk](https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk) - UK eating-disorder information and support. **Books:** *The Autism-Friendly Cookbook* by Lydia Wilkins; *Cook As You Are* by Ruby Tandoh; *How to Keep House While Drowning* by KC Davis.

Clinical note

This guide is educational and does not replace individual medical, dietetic, allergy, swallowing or food-safety advice. Seek qualified support when intake or hydration is limited, weight or physical health is changing, allergies are suspected, swallowing is difficult, or food restriction and distress are increasingly affecting daily life.

A message from Maggie

A better day is not a debt you owe to your future self. Use it gently. Prepare the one thing that will make eating easier, keep your safe foods predictable and stop before you are empty. Feeding yourself does not have to look impressive to be worthwhile.

Space to Breathe Therapy | Bodmin, Cornwall | spacetobreathetherapy.co.uk